

Portland Harbor Superfund Site – Local Stories

Transcript: Sarah Taylor, Portland Harbor Community Advisory Group and Braided Rivers Campaign

For years growing up in rural Pennsylvania I was called Sadie, and I am now more often called grandma.

I find myself living now between the streams and gullies carved out of the Tualatin Mountains and the forested hillsides that frame the Willamette River and the city. These woods are filled with the placentas of babies I helped bring into the world. No matter how tired, returning these first homes to the Earth after a birth, for you see, I am a midwife, and I've been so for decades. Guiding new life into a world I pray with each delivery, will be kind and just.

For many many years, I was a midwife in Oregon, but in later years volunteered in Haiti and other countries. This is a picture of me with midwives in Haiti.

In Haiti, I came to understand the fear of rivers to a birthing mother. I remember a woman, not really quite in labor, begging me to let her stay at the birth center, finally saying to me 'I can't cross the river at night, I'll drown.' And a woman who died when the rivers flooded, because they couldn't cross, and the birth grew complicated, or a woman who couldn't get to the clinic to get birth control. I drove, walked, swam rivers there, to get to clinics and births. The midwives were, and are, the heroes of my heart. If they can be that brave, then I can face all the forces that prevent an equitable health outcome along the river of my small mountain.

But the challenges of the lower Willamette, no less deadly to mothers and babies, are in some ways harder to solve than those in Haiti. You see, one year I returned from Haiti after teaching community health assessments, and that was when my life changed again.

I had promised those midwives that when I got home, I would do an assessment of my community. I found PCBs, PHAs, dioxins, lead. And I read in disbelief the way that the babies, the mothers, the fathers of the Willamette Basin had been exposed to these chemicals for decades.

Frantically, I researched birth data in Portland by neighborhood. I looked up special education rates. But it was as I had suspected. My heart broke. What Portland Public Schools, what the Health Department blamed, on poverty and lifestyle, was systemic targeted industrial pollution of one group of people over decades. And then, in addition to packing a birth bag, I tried to explain and share. I was sure if people knew, they would stop poisoning the people of the Lower Willamette.

When a woman has long labor, we reposition, we hydrate, we encourage, we get her up to squat. And so it is with the cleanup of the river. No matter how, we have to keep trying new and new strategies.

No matter how I change my strategy, I live in a city that puts oil trains next to daycare centers and pipelines next to fault lines. We're a city that creates industrial sanctuaries in our poorest neighborhoods and breathe a sigh of relief that it is not in our neighborhood.

Sometimes in the late afternoons, I go out like the market women in Haiti, and visit with the people of this river and these craggy twisted hillside communities. I look for the oldest, the ones who knew the stories, and I sit and listen, and feel grateful. Many of these women, were orphaned. Their mothers died

when they were young. Over and over again, I hear “I grew up in a big family, but my mother died after working in the shipyards.”

This is no different than when a mother dies in Haiti, leaving families in a perpetual state of poverty. I can tell you this: I miss Haiti. I miss waking up to roosters, and prayers, and the song of the farmers. I understand it may be easier to cross a stream in Haiti than convince Portland to stop putting their mothers and babies in harm’s way.

And yet as a midwife, as midwives, we agree to protect and serve the next generation. I am 73, and in this chapter of my midwifery career, I am trying to stop generational poverty, birth defects, prematurity, and learning disabilities through an economic paradigm that shifts, that puts mothers and babies before corporations. So what propels me to work on this river is the environmental justice issues that every mother counts.

So I’m here because I believe that the environmental pollution is really harming generations of mothers and babies. And I’ve learned a lot and I’ve loved every step of the journey of getting to know better the elders in this Willamette River community.